

# Generational Differences in Waging Jihad

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**F**ROM NOVEMBER 2003 to July 2004, I read over 600 narratives from prisoners detained at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. While the information I present is anecdotal, I have drawn conclusions about the experiences of the young men (almost all between the ages of 18 to 25) from various countries who had been recruited to fight for Islam and support the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Many of the young detainees at the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay relate vivid “they-never-told-me-about-this” narratives describing what happened to them after they left their homes to train at terrorist and jihadist military camps in Afghanistan. Many expected to participate in jihad in Chechnya; few expected jihad would come to them in Afghanistan. For many of the young men shipped to training camps in Afghanistan, the unexpected became routine. They were left to help people they did not know well—the Afghani Taliban—and rub shoulders with brother Muslims with whom they felt uncomfortable. Instead of becoming martyrs, the young men were captured and imprisoned. No one had prepared them for such an unthinkable turn of events. Indeed, the Koran has precious little to say about imprisonment in service to Allah. As I pored over the stories of the young men who had left their homes to go to a training camp in Afghanistan, and who were unexpectedly plunged into jihad there, I noticed much dissonance between what they expected to accomplish by getting a taste of military training and what actually happened to them.

While the anecdotes cited do not reflect the comments or opinions of at least one group of young men at Guantanamo—Osama bin-Laden’s ideologically extremist bodyguards—they do suggest that a lot of recruits were unpleasantly surprised by events. Many recruits had left comfortable lives in the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, or Western Europe. Their travels, training, and combat experiences led them to encounter the improbable. Later, only a few would admit how painful this had been.

## Why Go on Jihad?

Many of the young men were motivated to leave home for Afghanistan, Chechnya, or Palestine because of the words and influence of imams and recruiters in their local mosques. The call to jihad is seductive to young men because it functions as a rite of passage into manhood and demonstrates one’s devotion to Islam, the religion of one’s ancestors. Whatever one needed, the imams were quick to position jihad as the panacea for lost, searching, disenfranchised youth—the way to whatever one needed. The recruiters used visual displays of persecuted Muslims, and routinely exposed recruits to films that featured suffering women and children in refugee camps in Chechnya or Palestine. Multiple means of persuasion, from lectures to radio advertisements, motivated the young to go to Afghanistan.

To complete the requirements of jihad, they were told they could—

- Perform zekat (provide charitable donations to help widows, orphans and refugees).
  - Teach the Koran or Arabic.
  - Visit a country that was a model of sharia (strict Islamic rule).
  - Perform one’s duty as a Muslim male and learn to use weapons to protect one’s family.
  - Help Muslim brothers fight off Western oppressors to put an end to the corruption that threatens Islam everywhere.
- Then, of course, there were the real reasons why these young men left home:
- Unemployment.
  - A failed business.
  - Failure in higher education.
  - Substance abuse problems.
  - A criminal record with impending jail time.
  - Disagreements with family members.

Many Gulf States detainees, particularly young unskilled and semi-skilled laborers, took the training camp plunge because they were unemployed. They saw going on jihad as “alternative employ-

ment.” Nongovernmental organizations frequently hired young men for warehouse and distribution work to provide relief materials such as foodstuffs or blankets to a local population, so the call to jihad appeared to be more of the same.

In contrast, young, educated Saudis who departed for jihad were motivated by a desire for self-discovery and a challenge. To go to Afghanistan to observe the model of a pure Islamic state was a worthy endeavor for a devout young man. For the idealistic, jihad was a chance to get one’s spiritual and physical life together; for others it was a chance to prove oneself a man; for still others, it offered temporary relief from poverty or the ravages of substance abuse. Off they went, showing multiple faces of motivation: the rich and the poor, the religious and the political, those seeking identity, those seeking work, and those trying to save themselves from themselves.

## Pre-9/11 Recruitment

The millennial year 2000 was a warmup compared to 2001, a banner year for recruiting youth for jihad. Recruitment intensity ran strong, with imams and recruiters busily sending boys on jihad. The call to train reached some young men via radio. (Unfortunately, what the radio messages were, how frequently the messages were played, or what stations carried these recruitment appeals remains unexplored.) Young men were also recruited by visiting speakers at local mosques. Several detainees mentioned the experience of being recruited while on hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca that includes religious activities lasting a week. They were introduced to the idea of volunteering for jihad in the context of a religious pilgrimage. The Hajj was used by more than one clever recruiter to send a young man on his next pilgrimage—the so-called holy war in Afghanistan.

Several interrogators asked detainees if they had ever left home before going on jihad. Some more affluent Saudis had taken leisure trips out of the country. One young Saudi said he had been permitted to go shopping (once) in Bahrain. While it would be inaccurate to say all the young men had such limited travel experience, for the most part, Gulf States and Saudi detainees were not widely traveled. Few Yemenis could afford to do so.

**The Facilitators.** Getting the Gulf States or Saudi youth on the road to attend training proved difficult. Enter the “facilitators”—a network of Muslims practiced in furthering the jihad mission. Although European and North African recruits could get around alone, Gulf States and Saudi men needed the facilitators’ help.

Facilitators ensured the right persons met the young in the right places and got them to their training destinations. Of interest is that many young men report that facilitators intercepted them at airports and hotels. Some facilitators actually drove the recruits to specific locations; others simply met the recruits and traveled with them for one leg of the journey. Because no detainee had reported missing a connection with his facilitator or local contact in the course of traveling to a training camp, one assumes the facilitation network routing recruits to Afghanistan was well-funded and well-organized.

**Loss of Identity.** Recruitment for jihad often necessitated the use of an alias, or kunya. Although the detainees did not take a kunya at the beginning of their travels, many had selected a name by the time they reached the last safehouse before arriving at the camp. Supposedly, the new name gave the recruit a measure of safety and protected his and his family’s identities. The Taliban arrested any person considered to be a spy, and Al-Qaeda was vigilant in rooting out spies, so recruits willingly chose a temporary name during travel, training, or assignment.

After the recruits adopted a new identity, they were asked to surrender any passports or national identification cards that linked them to their former lives. They gave these to designated recipients at one of the last safehouses used before arrival at the training camp. The recruits seemed to have no problem with this, believing it was better to give up the documents than lose them. They also took for granted they would get the documents back after the jihad. The facilitators set up trust accounts for passports and other forms of identification, and the recruits never doubted that the passports and identification cards would remain where they were deposited.

**The Downside of the Camps.** Training facilities in Afghanistan were language-specific. Because a shared language speeded up learning, training camps were largely organized by language groups. Al-Qaeda trained Arabs; Libyans trained North Africans; Uzbeks trained other Uzbeks and Tajiks.

None of the training camps had medical facilities. Those detainees who had left Western Europe’s or Saudi Arabia’s health-care systems behind became ill within the first month at camp. Sometimes, an illness might last for months; however, detainee narratives do not mention “group illnesses,” although malaria and dysentery affected many of them. Gulf States and Saudi recruits described extended, debilitating illnesses that prevented them from finishing training and rendered them useless for combat. A few said they left the

training camp and headed to the border alone to reach Pakistan for medical treatment because they believed Pakistan, unlike Afghanistan, offered real doctors and medical facilities. Some tried to return home for treatment. Others said that when they became seriously ill at camp, they were removed to safehouses or hospitals. The camps could bandage a wound but had no other medical supplies. The detainees quickly realized that those practicing medicine in the camps were not real doctors, and sick detainees showed an unusual amount of initiative when it came to leaving a camp to seek medical attention.

Before U.S. troops deploy overseas, they receive a variety of vaccinations. I find it odd that the jihad recruiters allowed young men to leave for a remote destination without receiving vaccinations for common illnesses (such as malaria, yellow fever, and tetanus). Older detainees who had experience with an established military (Syrian or Egyptian, for example) received medical care through their respective militaries. Why would a sophisticated group like Al-Qaeda send unvaccinated recruits to a country like Afghanistan, where the drinking water was unsafe and there was little sanitation?

Al-Qaeda likes Western technology enough to use plastic explosives but seems to eschew the medical aspect of preparing for war. Al-Qaeda also knew what recruits would be exposed to in Afghanistan, yet refused to inform them of the possible health risks. The organization would spend money for plane tickets, hotel reservations, ground travel, and communications systems to get recruits to safehouses and training camps, but risked—and lost—an enormous amount of manpower and man-hours when recruits became ill.

Perhaps Al-Qaeda did not use the medical technology available to protect recruits because winning jihad means massing and using manpower. Doctrinally in Islam, those who die for the cause of jihad become martyrs and, thus, receive eternal rewards. So in a sense, Al-Qaeda had a religious license to throw bodies into the fray—the more, the better. The will of Allah would determine who withstood illness and who succumbed.

**The Consequences of Illness.** As much as 25 percent of those in training camps reported becoming ill and suffering with illness for months. Because Al-Qaeda overlooked the medical requirements of a military operation, it had much less actual manpower than the number of its recruits suggested. Sickness dramatically reduced Al-Qaeda's ability to help the Taliban stop the Northern Alliance.

A number of young detainees had frightening memories of the sicknesses they endured. Many re-

ported feeling depleted and vulnerable: camp food was mainly gruel, a subsistence diet not calculated to improve health, but the men were still expected to participate in rough physical conditioning. Physical output and poor nutrition undoubtedly weakened their immunity so they more readily succumbed to illness. From 10 to 15 detainees recalled being arrested at a hospital in either Pakistan or Afghanistan. Many were unsure how they had gotten there. Some recalled that a local had taken them. Many did not know how long they had been there. Later, when these men were identified at the hospital as Arabs or as foreign fighters, Northern Alliance or Pakistani authorities promptly arrested them and turned them over to U.S. forces.

## The U.S. Will Do “Nothing”

While recruits assembled in Afghanistan to support the Taliban against the Northern Alliance, 9/11 occurred. Some recruits were still in training camps; others were on the fronts but had seen little action. Yet, all seemed to feel a part of something larger than themselves. When news of 9/11 reached the young men, they routinely asked their older, more experienced trainers or mujahideen what would happen next. The universal answer was “nothing.” So the young recruits shrugged off any worries of a post-9/11 calamity, although many were aware that the Taliban had been hosting Bin-Laden and knew he moved freely among the training camps. The universal consensus was that if Islamic brothers had destroyed a U.S. skyscraper, it was a good day for Muslims everywhere. Islamic brothers had brought down a symbol of the West; Bin-Laden had won a great victory; and nothing would happen to a foreign fighter in Afghanistan.

But why did the older men not expect retaliation after the 9/11 attack? Because there had been no significant retaliation after the terrorist attacks on the Khobar Towers housing complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, and the USS *Cole* in Port Aden, Yemen. It was reasonable to assume the United States would, once again, do little. Al-Qaeda also did not want to alert the young recruits that a larger, more dangerous game might have just begun.

Whether they believed the United States would do nothing or because Al-Qaeda was effective at keeping its young recruits calm, “nothing” was the answer many youths accepted as they, along with the former Soviet mujahideen, the Bosnians, and the Chechens, waited patiently on mountain slopes in Afghanistan to fire on the Northern Alliance. They expected nothing to interfere with their waiting and what they intended to do.

## Encounters with the Unexpected

Six weeks after 9/11, the United States began dropping bombs on alleged Al-Qaeda sites and other Islamic fighter training camps in Afghanistan. By mid-October 2001, recruits from Europe, Africa, Central Asia, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States were running for their lives. One detainee said that when he looked up and saw U.S. planes, he did not want to fight the Americans. Many knew they had signed up to fight the Northern Alliance, but they had not bargained on the United States entering the fray.

The older men who had said nothing would happen were now desperate to leave Afghanistan. Arab recruits were told to exit Afghanistan as soon as possible because a price was on their heads. Many recruits sought cover in the Tora Bora Mountains but were caught in the bombing and suffered shrapnel wounds or lost limbs after stepping on landmines. Many were not dressed for the cold weather of the Tora Boras and were not sure with whom they were living or where their supplies were. Quite a few hired Afghan guides to get them out of the mountains and spent many days on foot trying to get to the border. They formed small groups and ditched their weapons as they tried to cross the border from Afghanistan to Pakistan. Others, who had been wounded near the border, recalled that a local Afghani transported them somewhere for medical help. Some recalled being rounded up and betrayed by Pakistanis who sold them to the Northern Alliance. Some reported they could have purchased their freedom from the Northern Alliance if they had had enough money to pay the price demanded. A number admitted that if they had known what they had to face in jihad, they would not have participated unless in direct defense of their homeland.

## Stranded

Advertising one thing and delivering another amounts to betrayal. In the training camps of Afghanistan, the caves of Tora Bora, and the prisons of Pakistan, many young men discovered they had undertaken a journey no one could realistically explain. The risks had been purposely omitted to avoid discouragement, and the supposed rewards were nonexistent.

Some detained Arabs said that after the fall of Kabul, locals warned them to leave Afghanistan because foreign fighters were being rounded up and arrested. Many detainees said that not having passports, identification, or other travel documents heightened their fears of being isolated, trapped, and stranded in a hostile place. One young detainee commented that when it came to getting Arabs

out of Afghanistan into Pakistan safely, "Al-Qaeda took care of their own." He noted that some escapes appeared to be planned and went more smoothly than others.

A handful of young men in detention described surviving the Mazar-E-Sharif (MES) uprising. One was shot twice but crawled to the basement of the MES compound to hide. He survived a week of explosions and flooding underground, and emerged alive.

When U.S. bombing forced the Arab and foreign fighters to scatter, the issue of national identification cards and passports surfaced again. As the jihadists tried to escape by crossing into other countries, many regretted not having official papers with them. Most knew where they had left their passports or identification cards, but had no hope of going back to retrieve them. Initially, they thought having a false name and no identification would make it more difficult for arresting authorities to prove that they were Arab. Others thought having a passport would win them help from their respective embassies. Curiously, forged IDs or passports were rare. Foot soldiers rarely possessed forged documents: Al-Qaeda usually procured these (for a fee) for higher level operatives. For those who had kept their official papers, even a passport or identification card was no guarantee they would be taken to their embassies if arrested. Moreover, many embassies in Pakistan did not even attempt to locate their nationals.

Official U.S. records do not indicate that the Saudi Arabian Government made any special requests to the United States, Afghanistan, or Pakistan to gain access to detainment centers or prisons to identify their nationals or to secure their release. One Saudi representative was observed outside a prison near Kandahar, Afghanistan, but it is not known whether he was passing through the area on some other business or whether he had been sent specifically to examine the prison. What is known is that he did not talk to any of the Saudi detainees.

The more sophisticated recruits seem to understand why their governments did not look for them, but the naïve recruits insisted they deserved support from their governments for fighting for Islam and were quite disappointed when they did not receive it. Of course, the Saudi Arabian Government had little interest in working to release troublesome Al-Qaeda members or jihadists from detention: extremist groups oppose the current Saudi monarchy.

## Capture and Detention

Perhaps the greatest shock the young men faced was capture, then detention by various authorities

before being transferred into U.S. custody. The imprisoned young men in Afghanistan or Pakistan recall “rough handling” during interrogations and daily treatment. A few men said prisoners sometimes disappeared from their midst. Whether these men were released, died, or were murdered remains unknown.

The International Red Crescent has reminded the United Nations that prolonged detention is damaging to human well-being, but the wheels of government grind slowly when sorting out identities and nationalities. While appearing high tech and fast, the real intelligence process inches along in nanometers.

Lengthy detention in a foreign land was the one outcome of jihad no jihadist appears to have anticipated. Recruiters, trainers, and imams in their fatwas talked about martyrdom, but no one mentioned imprisonment. The older generation had omitted any discussion of imprisonment in preparing the young recruits for jihad. Those recruited were supposed to achieve (and win) jihad through martyrdom. Even if jihad were lost, one could still be a martyr for the cause. In fact, one key Al-Qaeda operative (confined elsewhere) talked longingly about the martyrdom he missed. But a prisoner? This was unthinkable. The orators who drummed up bodies for the purpose of “defending” Islam never warned of the hardships of incarceration.

## Reframing Jihad

Experience marks us, whether the marks are the physical scars of battlefield wounds or the emotional scars of separation, loss, and death. The scars of experiencing what no one told them might happen run deep in the young men imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay, but does captivity and imprisonment change the young soldier more than the older? Is the young jihadist more likely to take action against the United States, once released, or are the older men more likely to do so?

What is striking is that a number of the young detainees have already psychologically reframed their jihad experience. They now have new parameters for engaging in jihad. Some said they would go on jihad again, but only to protect their homeland. Several declared they would never participate in jihad again. Others said they had now fulfilled their obligation to Islam and need not go on jihad again. Perhaps one in four of the young detainees

would go on jihad again. Among the older men, a greater number seemed less affected or intimidated by imprisonment and stated they would likely engage in jihad again.

## Future jihads

Who will U.S. forces fight next in the Global War on Terrorism? Close scrutiny of those detained at Guantanamo provides insight into the minds we will undoubtedly face in the future. The older men tend to be more hardcore Islamic extremists simply because they are more deeply set in their religious beliefs and behaviors. More often than the young, they have difficulty in dealing with any kind of change. Saturated with radical Islamic religious beliefs, the older men are less amenable to rehabilitation, that is, to adopt the practice of a more moderate Islam. We can expect them back, at an even more advanced age, in the global fray.

On the other hand, the younger men show less rigidity in belief and behavior. They are much more reasonable in their thinking and are clearly more open to change. Carefully planned psychological operations (PSYOP) can show them the dark, unexpected side of jihad and expose them to the realities their recruiters ignored. While such a campaign might not keep all young men out of terror networks, reducing the rate of reenlistment would reduce the overall terrorist headcount—and the fewer terrorists in the world, the better.

While the younger detainees have successfully reframed jihad and discovered reasons not to fight again, they also say they believe in defending their homeland if attacked, which might explain why the United States has encountered so much resistance in Iraq. Once a Western entity engages militarily on Muslim soil, jihad mutates, becoming not only the defense of Islam on one's street in everyday life, but the defense of Islam from a larger enemy—Western corruption.

When jihad involves armed resistance against Western civilization, the Islamic male has no choice but to fight because nothing in the Koran or any other part of his intellectual and emotional structure will allow him to decline to fight. Until all Iraqis take a page from the Guantanamo detainees and develop a way of thinking that permits fidelity to the Koran and preserves the tenets of Islam, Iraq's civil war will undoubtedly continue. **MR**

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